

Erika Lesser

Slow Food

Preserving Traditional Foods and the Heritage of Taste



Slow food. As in the opposite of fast food? Sort of. But what makes a food “slow” anyway? Sour pickles that soak in cold brine for three months; raw milk cheeses that age in caves for a year or more; a whole barbecued hog that cooks to sublime tenderness over a low flame for two days—all of these are literal examples of slow foods. But to truly understand—and experience—the essence of slowness is to more than simply taste the product of a slowly rendered preserving or cooking process.

Born out of a quixotic protest over the arrival of a McDonald’s fast-food restaurant at the Spanish Steps in Rome, Slow Food has evolved beyond its early years as a gastronomic society into an international movement whose purpose is broader than the mere exultation of culinary ideals. Slow Food has adopted a complex cultural, educational, charitable, and scientific mission. Its focus is to better understand and preserve the connection between gastronomy and ecology; that is, the food we eat, the land it comes from, and all of the steps that bridge the two.

Understanding this connection is not an esoteric academic exercise. The industrialization and standardization of food production, packaging, and marketing serves to distance us, physically, intellectually, and emotionally, from our

meals and their origin. With every day, it becomes more apparent that this distancing has already had disastrous consequences (and may continue to spawn more), as food-borne illness from *e coli* to mad cow disease, both “new” health problems that evolved from industrialized farming methods, pose increasing threats to human and animal well-being.

Slow Food chooses not to dwell on the negative, such as lamenting the loss of regional food diversity or the safety of our food supply. Instead, we encourage reviving the pleasures of the table, celebrating food traditions, and embracing a slower, more harmonious rhythm of life, primarily by allowing our sense of taste to be our guide. Slow Food’s mission is embodied by our *convivia* (local chapters), events and publications, and especially through unique projects like the Ark of Taste (inspired by Noah’s Ark), which seeks to identify, promote, and protect foods that are in danger of extinction.

Ark USA is safeguarding an ever-growing collection of high quality and culturally significant food, such as the Delaware Bay Oyster, Aged Dry Jack Cheese, and the Sun Crest Peach. The Ark USA project is particularly concerned about gastronomic resources that reflect the history and culture of a region and that are endangered by industrial-agricultural standardization. In addition, Slow Food devotes priority to foodstuffs that are produced organically on a small scale. Ark USA’s purpose is to document and promote these traditional American products and to creatively assist growers and producers in establishing and enhancing markets for their specialty foodstuffs as a means of preservation. In this fashion, the Ark program works to protect biodiversity, support sustainable practices in agriculture, and champion a broader appreciation for foods, particularly among children.

An especially complex and illuminating example of the argument for saving historic foodstuffs is naturally grown, hand-parched wild rice

Gathering organic apples. Dario Dalmasso, along with his father, mother, and uncle, grows old varieties of apples and corn in Serravalle di Piasco, a small town outside of Turin, Italy. Photo by Les Meyers, courtesy Slow Food USA.





from the upper Great Lakes region. Wild rice is, in fact, not rice at all. It is an annual aquatic grass that produces an edible and highly nutri-

tious seed. According to recent findings by researchers at the University of Minnesota, the genetic make-up of *Zizania aquatica* is closely related to Asian rice. Wild rice now grows only in a limited area of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Canada. For several thousand years, it flourished beyond the Great Lakes region including much of the eastern United States. The draining of large areas of wetlands for farming and the creation of reservoirs have unfortunately destroyed much of the plant's natural habitat. In addition, current threats include pollution, recreational boating, and additional clearing by land-owners. In order to thrive, wild rice requires very specific conditions. It will only grow in cold, slow-moving water of a certain depth. If the water is too deep, sunlight will fail to reach and mature the plant. Water too shallow produces weak stems. Once the grass becomes tall enough to break the surface of the water, it sends out float leaves for support while the stalk continues to grow and develop. The plant can be uprooted if the water rises or if it is subject to winds or currents. Adapting to its environment, wild rice has evolved such that it produces a series of seeds that mature at different times to ensure the plant's survival. Seeds on a single stalk will ripen over the course of 10-14 days. Because the rice ripens gradually, each stand of grass can be harvested repeatedly throughout the season, which usually occurs during the months of August and September.

For thousands of years, wild rice was harvested as a staple and sacred food by Native Americans who shaped their cultures around it. The abundance of the grass in the wild created a reliable food source that could be stored over the long winter. Harvesting, in the traditional manner, is done by canoe. Using a pole, the driver powers the canoe through the water while the harvester uses two long beater sticks (called "knockers") to strike the ripe grain from the stalks of grass into the boat. In this manner, the long large grains of rice remain unbroken. After the harvest, the green rice, by Native American custom, is cured and then parched over a wood fire in order to dry the hulls and separate them from the grain, which is then hulled and winnowed.

Parching over wood dramatically affects the color and taste of the rice. Unlike industrialized wild rice which is nearly black in color, hand-processed rice can be various shades of smoky gray or beige with dark flecks. Hand-picked, hand-parched rice cooks evenly and has appealing nutty, toasted, tea-like aromas and flavors. The cooking time for the traditionally-produced grain is significantly less than for cultivated, machine-processed varieties.

Both Minnesota and Wisconsin have instituted a number of laws which regulate the harvest, purchase, and sale of wild rice. Several private and public organizations are working to restore wetlands as wild rice habitats. It is problematic that several types and grades of grain are currently sold under the name of "wild rice." Some of these are not wild at all, but a cultivated grain grown in paddies in the Great Lakes and California. The main categories of commercially-available wild rice, in order of decreasing mechanization are: paddy rice, a commercially-cultivated, hybrid grain which is always harvested and processed by machine; lake rice, which is machine or hand-harvested and machine-parched and processed; and Native American harvested and processed lake and river rice which is gathered and parched entirely by hand.

Authentic, traditionally harvested and parched wild rice suffers from very limited production and distribution. Few people outside the upper Midwest have ever tasted this product, which is an important part of the economy for several groups of Native Americans. Slow Food's Ark USA Committee has identified three Minnesota facilities that process the rice by hand parching. By inducting wild rice into the Ark program, Slow Food hopes to showcase this endangered resource and promote the preservation of a Native American cultural tradition.

Erika Lesser is Director of Programming for Slow Food USA. She is indebted to Barbara Bowman, Chair of the Ark Selection Committee, and to Marcia and Chuck Lavine for their research and written submission of wild rice to Ark USA.

Slow Food USA is a non-profit organization with 5,000 members and 56 convivia (chapters). There are over 60,000 members and 500 chapters of Slow Food worldwide. For more information on Slow Food, visit our web site <www.slowfood.com> or contact us at Slow Food USA, P.O. Box 1737, New York, NY 10021 and at 212-988-5146.